

Education Week's blogs > Finding Common Ground

## Improving Instruction: 8 Areas That Matter Most

By Peter DeWitt on December 1, 2015 9:07 AM

"Where do we start?"

It's a question that we all hear often. Whether it's a faculty meeting or after an engaging and inspiring professional development session (YES, those do exist!), educators want to know where to put one foot in front of the other. It seems as though it would be an easy question to answer but we have a lot flying at us all at once.

*Will it fit into the building goal?*

*Will the district support it?*

*If it doesn't go well, will it end up on my evaluation?*

Those three questions can create a roadblock to getting out of the pre-contemplative stage of change. We spend so much time worrying about adult issues, which John Hattie wrote about in the Politics of Distraction, that we don't often focus on some simple methods that will help us get the biggest bang for our buck.

We need some clarity!

Hattie, someone I work with as a Visible Learning trainer, has done the largest meta-analysis ever done in education, and he keeps collecting valid and reliable research from all developed nations to update his data base. Within the research Hattie found 150 influences on learning. Many of those influences have an effect size of .40 or better, which is called the hinge point based on the fact that it can provide a year's worth of growth for a year's input.

There are a few areas that could create a catalyst for other positive changes within the classroom. Some of those influences will seem like common sense. So, before we read them, we have to suspend some of our deeply held beliefs. We have to let go of our confirmation bias. Confirmation bias is *"the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one's beliefs or hypotheses, while giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities (Wikipedia)."*

Here we go with 8 influences that could help provide better opportunities for learning in the classroom...

**Teacher-student relationships (.72)** - Knowing the hinge point is a .40 effect size, we can see that teacher-student relationships can have an enormous effect on learning. Russ Quaglia found that students who believe their teachers like them will try harder in those classrooms.

However, teacher-student relationships are not easy, because sometimes those relationships are based on how a teacher believes a student should act in the classroom, rather than looking at it as a partnership. We also know, based on the work of Malcolm Gladwell and others, that students size us up within about 10 seconds of meeting us.

If we want some major bang for our buck, we need to work on teacher-student relationships. Unfortunately this is seen as something "soft" and in these days of needing to quantify everything...we should use Hattie's research to show how important this is to learning in the classroom.

**Parental involvement (.59)** - These two words together can sometimes make us cringe. School has often been a place where teachers make decisions and home is a place where parents make decisions. The bottom line is that parental involvement is very important, because parents can help support their children at home. The disconnect happens when we think parents already know how to do that, or parents who want to question teachers on their teaching practices. The questions we need to ask are:

- *How do we explain to parents what their kids are learning?*
- *How do we communicate to parents the new learning and initiative changes that are happening in school?*
- *Are parents welcome to question what we do in the classroom?*

We have to make sure that, before we chastise parents for not being there, we haven't done something to put them off in the first place. We can't blame parents for not being there when we haven't really ever invited them in for real, authentic dialogue.

**Feedback (.75)** - Bottom line. We say we give feedback but we are usually providing praise or a grade. Praise and grades do very little to move learning forward. Read **this Hattie article** titled **Know Thy Impact** from the September 2012 issue of **Educational Leadership (ASCD)**. There are 3 types of feedback and they are task, process, and self-regulation.

**Teacher clarity (.75)** - This is another place where confirmation bias enters into the equation. We think that we are being clear as we provide

directions to students, because we have all of the information in our heads. Unfortunately, when we speak we don't provide exemplars or the clearest directions so students sit and look around at what their peers are doing to help them process the information we gave. One way we can make sure that we are clear with our directions is by videoing ourselves teach, which is called micro-teaching.

**Micro-teaching (.88)** - Grab your smartphone, a **Swivl** and start recording. Micro-teaching means we video ourselves teaching for 15 minutes. When the students are gone and we are alone, we sit back and watch ourselves on video. The first time is merely to get through how we dressed that day and what our hair looked like.

Press play to watch it a second time to start seeing what the student engagement looks like for that particular lesson. Based on the second view we should start establishing a goal that we want to achieve. On the third view we should make sure we established the right goal, and then think of a strategy to use to meet that goal. For more information about using video, **check out this blog on why using video matters** (Knight).

**Growth mindset vs. fixed mindset (.19)** - The growth mindset won't work as well as it should because we do a lot of talking about it but we treat students in fixed ways. Let's try to change that. **Read here for more information.**

**Teacher talk vs. student dialogue - We talk entirely too much in class**, and for most teachers, that seems to be OK to them. Stop. We need to talk less and increase student dialogue. That takes modeling and practice, but it is well worth the time we put into it.

**Positive interactions vs. negative interactions** - I mentioned Jim Knight before. I work with Jim as an instructional coaching trainer. One of the ways we can see if our negative interactions with students outweigh our positive ones is to grab a critical friend or instructional coach and have them use a sheet separated into two sides...one for negative interactions and one for positive interactions. Have them sit through a lesson and check off each time we do either. For more examples of checklists that can help transform teach and learning, **click here for a free resource from Knight.**

## In the End

We often don't change our practices because we don't know where to start. Choose one of the influences from above and take 30 days to really focus on making the change in your classroom. We have so many things flying at us in school, wouldn't it be nice to work on one we believe in?

**Connect with Peter on Twitter.**

**Categories:** Instructional Coaching Professional Development Teacher Voice Visible Learning

**Tags:** ASCD Crowin Press Effect Size Focus on Teaching Growth Mindset Hinge Point Jim Knight John Hattie Russ Quaglia Swivl